Chapter 86
Profiling and Supporting Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

Adult learners are a large group for higher education. Adult learning is different from children's learning in that adult learners are more self-directed, having prior experience, and are internally motivated to learn subjects that are more relevant to life and can be applied immediately. Understanding adult learners' characteristics can help institutions and instructors support adult students' learning and success. This chapter reviews the adult learning theories and methodologies and how they can be applied in adult learning. The chapter also discusses adult learners' characteristics and what teaching strategies and practice may facilitate adult learners' needs. Distance learning technologies and integration of the technologies are discussed. Different levels of support and recent initiatives for supporting adult learners are investigated.

INTRODUCTION

Adult learners are loosely identified with a larger group characterized as "non-traditional" learners (Adult Learning Focused Institution, 2005) or adults aged 25 or older who attend college for the first time or consider going back to college. More precisely, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2011) summarizes seven characteristics of adult learners: have delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, attend part-time, are financially independent of their parents, work full-time while enrolled, have dependents other than a spouse, are a single parent, and lack a standard high school diploma.

Adult learners are a large group for higher education. "Traditional 18-22 year-old full-time undergraduate students residing on campus account for only 16% of higher education enrollments" (Stokes, 2006). Using the simpler and more common criterion of age to define an "adult learner," more than

one third of students in U.S. higher education are twenty-five or older (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

Distance learning courses and programs provide flexible learning opportunities for all types of students, especially for adult students. The newest SLOAN survey (The SLOAN Consortium, 2012) on online education in the US in 2011 shows that the 10% growth rate for online enrollments far exceeds the 2% growth in the overall higher education student population. The NCES reports in *The Condition of Education 2011* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011) that in 2007-08, 20% of all undergraduates took at least one distance education course and students with age 24 or older account for 90% of the group who took any distance education courses.

As more working adults consider going back to college and taking distance or eLearning courses, it is essential for educators and administrators to recognize adult learner characteristics and learning profiles. In doing so, we can design and deliver courses to meet their needs, and support adult students to reach their goals (Cercone, 2008; Frey & Alman, 2003; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Institutions can also promote and offer a more flexible and proactive Personal Learning Environment (PLE) that goes beyond the traditional formal learning management (Attwell, 2007). A PLE is an information system supported learning environment that helps learners to organize their own learning process and content. It is more open, collaborative, and long-term oriented than most current learning management systems. This can best serve adult learners' lifelong learning needs.

Adult learning occurs in a variety of settings including formal learning (goal-oriented and certified by a diploma or degree), non-formal learning (such as training at work, community-based learning), and informal learning (self-directed learning without a structured outline (Cedefop, 2008; Eaton, 2010; Merriam, Baumgartner & Caffarella, 2007). It is important for the educators to understand that there is a value in learning of all kinds and learning is a lifelong endeavor. Knowledge of adult learning principles is essential for effective teaching. Understanding how adults learn, the adult-learning principles, their learning styles and motivation styles, and the challenges they face in learning will help increase teaching success, make the learning experience more meaningful and enhance their learning satisfaction. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of adult learning theories and summarize adult learner characteristics and best practices. First, we will review major adult learning theories. Then we categorize and present common adult learner characteristics from three perspectives (demographics, learning motivations and expectations, learning styles and capabilities) and then summarize the facilitators and barriers to adult learning. Last, we discuss the implications of adult learners' characteristics to common practices of teaching strategies, online learning applications, and administrative support.

BACKGROUND: ADULT LEARNING THEORIES AND RESEARCH SURVEY

There has been a variety of learning theories, models and frameworks focusing on adult learning. Adult learning is different from children's learning in that adult learners are more self-directed, having prior experience, and are internally-motivated to learn subjects that are more relevant to life and can be applied immediately. Adult learning theories emphasize the importance of experience and self-directedness and imply that adult learners benefit most from experientially based constructivist-learning environments.

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